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Seller of Russian books profits on culture swap

By Sue Baker
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A Geneva summit decision to expand U.S.-Soviet cultural exchanges may not do much for superpower relations, but it could be a boon for an unusual shop tucked away in Rockville, near the nation's capital.

"Any exchange type of situation would generate some sort of interest and therefore sales," said Anatoly Zabavsky, the affable Polish-born director of Victor P. Kamkin booksellers, believed to house the biggest stock of Russian-language material outside Moscow.

"People would be traveling, needing city guides, maps," Mr. Zabavsky said in an interview. "It stands to reason, if the Bolshoi Theater comes here, I'm pretty sure that people would like a recording ... and, of course, we are the source."

The sprawling 12,000-square-foot store is well known to such Washington-area browsers as Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, the

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Central Intelligence Agency and other U.S. government types, as well as Soviet buffs and Kremlinologists from the capital's slew of foreign policy think tanks.

If Kamkin's three million volumes falls short of the 4.2 million in Moscow's showplace Dom Knigi or House of Books, the inventory here boasts many a title long-banned, out of print or in short supply in the Soviet Union.

Most of Kamkin's materials, however, are official Soviet publications ranging from political tracts by Kremlin leader Mikhail Gorbachev, President Reagan's partner at the Nov. 19-21 Geneva summit, to statistical data and technical journals — a magnet for an unusual clientele and occasional target for controversy.

Mr. Zabavsky, who has managed the business since founder Victor Kamkin died in 1974, obtains 95 percent of his 3 million-book inventory from Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga or International Books, the Soviet government agency that supplies official Russian books, magazines, newspapers, party speeches and other publications to countries around the world.

Kamkin's also is the sole agent in North America for recordings from the official Soviet music agent, Melodiya.

All this prompts right-wing groups to charge that the store is an extension of the Soviet government and that the CIA and its Soviet counterpart, the KGB, frequent it to keep an eye on each other.

Mr. Zabavsky shrugs off such allegations.

"We are not agents of the Soviet Union," he says. "We are strictly an American corporation. We are here for profit."

He is also circumspect about his customers:

"You could be a KGB agent or a CIA agent," he said. "but if you walk in here, nobody's going to ask you who you are or what you're doing here."

One Washington Sovietologist and Kamkin customer said he had never been approached by the KGB in the store but added that, given the number of "highly secretive" U.S. government agencies involved in studying the Soviet Union, "it would be amazing if the Soviets would not be interested."

On a busy day in Kamkin's, which first opened its doors in 1953, there might be as many as 50 people browsing among the tomes, which are crammed into 12-foot-high bookshelves, stacked precariously on top and piled in the aisles.

Despite a brisk local business generated by Washington's government agencies, embassies, universities, institutes and think tanks, however, Mr. Zabavsky said 95 percent of Kamkin's business is conducted by mail.

A computer keeps track of some 18,000 mail-order customers — mostly in the United States but also in Canada, South America, Australia and Western Europe.

While Mr. Zabavsky is cagey about the bookstore's exact turnover, he said he buys about \$200,000 worth of books from Moscow each year, and sales are in the several "hundreds of thousands [of dollars] worldwide."

But he is looking for that boost from the summit's afterglow, and added he hoped that a second Kamkin store — a retail outlet opened three years ago on New York's Fifth Avenue — will also see an increase in its mostly "off-the-street" business.

He said the store's wide selection of children's books, language texts, scientific publications, newspapers, magazines and more than 1,500 dictionaries is "what makes us so unique."

Unavailable in Moscow but well stocked at Kamkin's are works by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who denounces the Soviet system from exile in America, futurist writer Yevgeny Zamyatin and satirists Alexander Zinoviev and Vladimir Voinovich.

Such forbidden books, Mr. Zabavsky chuckles, are favorites with Soviet Embassy employees or Soviet visitors and come from Russian-language publishers in New York, London and Paris.